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7 October 1964

CHINA AS A NUCLEAR POWER
(Some Thoughts Prior to the Chinese Test)

TAB 5

Introduction

The United States should make a clear distinction between the need to publicly minimize the importance of the Chinese nuclear program on the one hand and the very serious implications of what the Chinese are doing on the other. This paper is an attempt to draw attention to some of these implications and to point out some probable consequences of this development -- consequences which may have an enormous effect upon the future of the United States and the world.

Long Term Significance

The Chinese have been working on their nuclear weapons program for about a decade. They are now ready to test their first weapon. When they complete the facilities we have already identified with their program they will be able to produce something like 30 to 50 weapons each year; and there is no reason to suppose that this represents their total planned program. Their early weapons will probably range in power from 20 to 100 kilotons and not be suitable for delivery by missile. But the first test will be followed by a series of tests to improve weapons design; and by

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1968 we must expect an initial thermonuclear test.* Warheads suitable for the short range ballistic missiles already under test will soon follow. By 1970 we can expect China to have ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads targeted on the cities of Asia. By 1975 an intercontinental capability is within reach, with the power to destroy San Francisco, Chicago, New York and Washington. With an intercontinental capability the Chinese will also be able to threaten all of Europe, including US military forces stationed there. It is difficult to predict the effects of such capability upon European attitudes either in London, Moscow or Warsaw.

Another 5 years should suffice to enlarge the capability to the point where it will be necessary to think in terms of a possible 100 million U.S. deaths whenever a serious conflict with China threatens. This will be 1980. A child born today will then be 16 years old. Cadets now entering our military academies will be captains or young majors. Quite possibly our next president will be forced to deal with a world shared with such a China.

*The lapsed time between first nuclear explosion and first thermonuclear test for other nuclear powers has been: US, 7 years 3 months; UK, 4 years; USSR, 4 years; France (probable) 4-5 years. While China is not believed to have an operating separation plant producing weapons grade U-235, it is possible that they do have. It is also quite possible that Chinese planning for TN weapons calls for only partial enrichment or, for a few weapons, the use of plutonium in place of U-235. The latter need not be as expensive as frequently assumed since heavily irradiated plutonium from power reactors could be used for components in which pre-initiation is not of concern.

While 1968 would not likely be judged the most probable year for a Chinese TN explosion, they could meet this schedule.

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There is room for argument about this schedule of events. They could happen more slowly. But if China follows her present course to its logical conclusion they will happen. And we should not bank too heavily upon technical delays and the expense to give us more time. After all, we went from first nuclear test to an operational ICBM with thermonuclear warhead in about the same number of years. The Soviet Union did considerably better, even though their technical base was widely believed to be inadequate to support such rapid progress. The Chinese have a far weaker industrial base; but on the other hand many elements which were very difficult and expensive development problems for us are now common knowledge or available on the open market. Also they have shown greater willingness to sacrifice for high priority objectives.

It is necessary to face clearly the fact that China will, barring interference, have in a few short years weapons which can destroy much of the United States. This is not to imply that we will not face grave problems before that day arrives. We must realize that there will be a continuous deterioration in our ability to influence the course of events, not only in Asia but elsewhere. As China goes down the road of becoming a nuclear power she will do her utmost to exploit her new weapons to achieve her goals. These goals are perfectly evident. China is determined to gain status as a world power, primarily by reducing U.S. power and influence in Asia and the Western Pacific. China is determined to seize the leadership of the Communist movement. This is to be done by exacerbating racial animosities, adopting the stance of the spiritual

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leader of all oppressed peoples and proving by example that China is the only militant and reliable source of aid to revolutionaries seeking to overthrow the existing order by force.

Hopes that nuclear weapons will bring greater caution to the Chinese are made to appear rather forlorn by the Chinese criticism of the Soviets for having been too timid in the use of their nuclear deterrent to aid the spread of Communism. Whatever our hopes it is only prudent to assume that the Chinese mean what they say* and make a forthright examination of the predictable damage to the U.S. security interests.

Direct Damage to the U.S. Strategic Position

The Chinese Communists seem determined to eject the United States from Asia. We can be sure that they will be seeking ways to exploit their nuclear weapons for this end. A direct attack upon our forces does not seem a rational prospect, but the threat value of even a small nuclear force upon Asian nations is certain to be substantial. As the Chinese stockpile grows, and as more and more sophisticated weapons are tested, the feeling that an accommodation must be reached with the Chinese will grow. Our structure of bases and alliances will be subjected to ever greater pressures. Our difficulty in maintaining our position will be

*Peng Chen, Politburo member and the principal speaker at the Chinese 15th Anniversary celebration, in Peking on Oct. 1 said: "The United States imperialists must get out of Taiwan, out of South Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, the Congo and West Berlin; out of Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America and out of all the places they have invaded."

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compounded by the fact that we will find ourselves gradually limiting our responses to challenges posed by the Chinese as we are forced to recognize that we are dealing with a nuclear power. The other nations of Asia will be very sensitive to our growing caution, and will see increasing advantage in asking us to leave. Before too many years we may be forced to rely entirely upon our own real estate and our own military forces.

Alternatively, we will find ourselves impelled to make deeper and more explicit commitments to the security of China's neighbors. Forces, nuclear weapons, command structures, and political commitments of the order of magnitude we have made in Europe may be necessary in Asia. Although these may be economically feasible for us, it is not clear that the U.S. Congress and public will support them to the extent they have in Europe.

The Chinese must consider that the methods by which they have sought to extend their influence in SE Asia have been quite successful. Their use of allied communist governments and communist parties which they support in a manner to avoid a direct challenge to superior U.S. power has brought them to a point where Chinese victory throughout SE Asia must seem likely even in the absence of a nuclear capability. However, throughout their struggle to eliminate U.S. influence in the area they have been forced to show caution at critical times to limit the risk of a showdown with the U.S. We must expect that they will seek ways to exploit their nuclear weapons to increase the freedom of action of their allies. They may well

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furnish nuclear arms to Hanoi and Pyongyang, for example. This would be quite consistent with the Chinese preference for presenting their challenges to the U.S. through third parties as well as with Chinese statements on nuclear weapons to the Russians and others. An important result of such further distribution of nuclear weapons would be additional inhibitions on U.S. and allied actions as the protection of nuclear arms moved nearer to the line of conflict.

This paper has not attempted to assess the influence which acquisition of nuclear weapons by the Chinese will have upon the general question of nuclear proliferation. It is obvious that holding any sort of line against further spread is greatly complicated by Chinese acquisition. Depending upon their behavior it could be made impossible.

In summary, even though there will be no dramatic shift in the balance of power as China begins to acquire nuclear weapons, there will be very important and potentially dangerous consequences. We shall begin to feel very significant results of this development within a few years; and the long term significance is enormous.

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